

«Living Pictures»: Transitions from Standstill to Motion in Tableaux Vivants and Early Cinema

Original title / Originaltitel

«Lebende Bilder» – Das Spiel mit Stillstand und Bewegung als mediale Geste des Ostentativen in Tableaux vivants und Frühem Kino

Summary / Zusammenfassung

Early cinema can only be understood within the broader field of visual culture at the end of the 19th century. This visual culture is to a large degree based upon an «aesthetics of astonishment» and an «exhibitionistic» or «ostensive» mode of address. At the turn of the century, tableaux vivants or living pictures were an immensely popular form of visual display. Although today largely associated with private entertainment within aristocratic or high-bourgeois circles at the beginning of the 19th century, they became increasingly wide-spread within the context of modern urban variety theater in the second part of the 19th century. Deploying living but motionless bodies to imitate paintings or sculptures, tableaux vivants appear as something like the reverse of the medium of film, which by contrast endows lifeless pictures with the appearance of life by animating them. Films were shown alongside tableaux vivants in vaudeville shows from 1896 on, and it is quite natural that films would take up the tradition of tableaux vivants just like they did with other forms of popular visual culture. Hence, motionless bodies imitating paintings or sculptures occur in many films of the period. However, in most cases these bodies are set in motion at one point or the other, thereby generating comical, magical or erotic effects, while at the same time displaying cinema's principal characteristic: motion. Bringing together turn of the century discourses about standstill and motion from a wide range of disciplines – amongst others: early film theory, aesthetics, and psychology – and linking them to a historical survey of mutual influences between tableaux vivants and Early cinema in major European cities such as Paris and Berlin, this dissertation project aims at exploring the self-reflexive use of transitions from standstill to motion as a specific strategy of displaying cinema's capacities as a new medium around 1900.

Project Leadership and Contacts / Projektleitung und Kontakte

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<http://www.mediality.ch/>

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